

## CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 17 March, 2002

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

You may never have thought much about it, but most of us spend a good portion of our lives trying to "find ourselves".

Deep in our hearts, we need to come face-to-face with the person we really are. It can be a fearsome experience, but it can also bring great peace.

In order to do it right, we need God:

Holy One!

Help me find myself.

I am

a mixture of motives and excuses,  
a blur of memories,  
a quiver of hope,  
a knot of fear,  
a tangle of confusion,  
a restless wanderer.

I wander somewhere between

gratitude and grievance,  
wonder and routine,  
high resolve and undone dreams,  
generous impulses and unpaid bills.

Help me to accept what I am

so I can begin to be Yours.

Make me

small enough to snuggle,  
young enough to question,  
old enough to forget,  
foolish enough to act for peace,  
skeptical enough to doubt the sufficiency  
of anything and anyone  
but You.

Let the power of Your presence

empower me,  
heal me,  
lift me up.

Hang in there...and may the God of healing and strength change your lives and make you whole.

#### THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

##### LENTEN RECONCILIATION

The Lenten Parish Reconciliation Service will be held at Most Holy Trinity on next Tuesday (19th) at 1900. It's your opportunity for Personal Confession. Confessions are also heard at the Chapel each Saturday at 1630...or you can just stop in at the Chaplain's Office anytime.

##### STATION OF THE CROSS

Every Friday of LENT at 1800, there will be STATIONS OF THE CROSS at the Chapel. Each week, the Ceremony will be followed by a simple supper of soup...to keep the spirit of FASTING.

##### LENTEN LECTURE SERIES

Every Tuesday evening of LENT at 1900 at the Chapel, there will be a Lecture Series, given by Fr. Don Timone, of Mount St. Mary's College (Note: next week's lecture will be on Monday evening because of the Reconciliation Service on Tuesday).

#### DID YOU KNOW?

##### ST. PATRICK:

Given all the hoopla surrounding this time of year, it seems fitting to expostulate a bit on PATRICK of Ireland, especially since Irish-Americans like myself make such a big deal of him, his life and his role in Irish religious history.

Here's the poop on pATRICK:

Much of the information about him comes from his own writings, especially from his CONFESSION. He was born a Roman citizen somewhere in the British Isles (making him a Celt even if he wasn't born in Ireland itself), and his parents were wealthy.

At age 16, he was kidnapped by Irish pirates and sold in Ireland as a slave. He worked as a shepherd there for about 6 years, and he experienced some sort of spiritual awakening and divinely-inspired dreams. Then he escaped to France (as promised in one of those dreams) and was eventually re-united with his family.

Years later, he dedicated himself to the study of religion under St. Germanus at Auxerre (a French monastery) and was ordained a deacon. He desperately wanted to return to Ireland, but at first, his superiors rejected the idea.

He was finally ordained a bishop by Pope Celestine I, and he returned to Ireland in or around 432 AD. There he ministered effectively for 30 years or so, baptizing thousands (including whole tribes) and establishing parishes and religious communities.

His efforts were resisted in an organized way by Druids and Celtic sorcerers, and there are many legends surrounding these efforts. In any case, he eventually undermined the power of the Druids, and after his death in 461 (or thereabouts), his disciples completed the conversion of the Irish population.

There are so many legends about him that it's difficult to separate fact from fiction.

Of course, one of the most famous stories is the belief that he charmed all the snakes in Ireland into the sea, where they drowned.

Another was the story that led to the "Wearing of the Green" on 17 March: PATRICK supposedly used the 3-leaf shamrock (from the Gaelic word "seamrog", meaning "clover") to illustrate the mystery of the Holy Trinity to the Irish. The three leaves connected to the one stem represent Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the stem represents the Godhead from which they proceed (three AND one at the same time). In PATRICK'S time, the shamrock had been used in Celtic fertility rituals; it was symbolic of three goddesses, and its leaves were ritually burned, with the ashes scattered over the fields to ensure good crops.

Secular observance of ST. PATRICK'S DAY in the USA was begun by Protestants in Boston in 1737 to benefit the needy of Irish blood. This tradition continued after the Revolutionary War under joint Catholic-Presbyterian coordination.

Of course, the most famous of these celebrations is the ST. PATRICK'S DAY PARADE in New York City.

In Ireland, even though there are parades and celebrations, the day is kept as a religious holyday.

#### PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...any cadet who's under particularly stressful academic pressure this week.

...all those who are traveling to West Point this weekend for Founder's Day.

...all our military brothers and sisters throughout the world (and their families), especially those in areas of risk.

...all our casualties in Asia over the last several weeks...and their families.

#### GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, what do you know about the Gospel of Thomas? An individual recently asked me if that Gospel was recognized by the Catholic Church. If you can shed any light, I'd greatly appreciate it. Thanks.

A: To answer your question, some background is necessary.

You have to remember that the Bible didn't just fall out of the sky. It seems silly to say this, but you'd be surprised at the number of people who seem to think that it did.

Many of the "books" of the Bible went through a long period of oral development before they were actually written down. Some were written as "letters", of course, but most were collections of stories that were passed down from generation to generation

before being transcribed.

This is true of the Four Gospels - the Bible stories about Jesus.

You have to remember that no stenographer followed Jesus around, copying down his every word.

After he left the earth, the people who knew him began telling stories about him as part of their preaching. These stories were eventually gathered into collections and put in writing. So, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were more "editors" than "composers" in a lot of ways. They gathered stories from their own experiences with Jesus - and from other people, too - and they put them together into collections that we call "The Four Gospels".

Of course, there are really more than just "four" Gospels. If you dig into the history of the Early Church, you can find "gospels" written by James, Thomas (the one you mentioned), Mary, Nicodemus, Philip and other apostolic figures...and some "gospels" that have no name on them at all...like one called "The Gospel of Truth".

Why don't we ever hear about these...and why didn't they make it into the Bible?

Because through the ages, the Catholic Church accepted only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as worthy of belief. The rest were considered unreliable.

Remember that the Bible didn't drop out of the sky in its completed form.

It was formed over several centuries by the Catholic Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That means that the early Christians didn't carry "bibles" around with them. As Jews, they knew their own story by heart; and as brand-new Christians, they told the stories of Jesus and shared the letters of Paul, Peter and the rest.

After a couple of centuries, the Church decided that it needed to figure out which sacred writings were authentic and which ones weren't. So the early Christian communities compiled lists of sacred books which were read in their localities, and they passed these lists around. The lists were called "canons" (that's the Greek word for "lists").

Eventually, these canons (lists) became standardized and accepted by the whole Church, but the process was never really completed in the Catholic world until the Council of Trent (1550s). So if you were Charlemagne or William the Conqueror or Richard the Lion-hearted, your version of the "Bible" would have been slightly different than Catholics read today.

Anyway, documents like "The Gospel of Thomas" would emerge from time to time, and the Church didn't feel that such documents were actually written by the person whose name was on them or that they didn't really reflect the message of Jesus as the Church had come to understand it through the Apostles' preaching. So these "books" never made it into the "canon" of Scripture, even though they claimed to be telling authentic stories or "sayings" of Jesus.

"The Gospel of Thomas" exists in Coptic (Egyptian), and the earliest copy of it was written around the 400s AD. Scholars believe that this early document was a copy of a lost Greek text, probably written during the mid-100s.

If you were to read this "Gospel", you would simply find it to be a collection of 114 "sayings" of Jesus; there are no stories, just "sayings". Some of these sayings can be found in our Four Gospels; some are different; some don't even sound like the Jesus we've come to know.

So the Church considered that it was not a true Gospel (although it might have accurate parts), and the book never made it into the canons (lists) of sacred books. And the same is true for all those other "Gospels".

## THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

### INERRANCY:

Perhaps you've never used the word in everyday speech.

Still, if you've ever studied the Bible in any depth, you know that the word gets lots of use in that context.

And it has caused controversy between some Protestants and Catholics over the years.

The word means "having no errors or mistakes".

And some Christians believe that the Bible is "inerrant" in the literal sense...that there are no errors of ANY kind in it.

It's easy to see why the word (and the idea behind it) has caused trouble.

So the discussion is about the question: "Is there error in the Bible?" or "Can it be correctly said that the Bible is 'inerrant'?"

It's complicated by the fact that there are indeed obvious errors in the Bible. These can be considered under four headings:

a) Biblical self-contradictions:

for example, Genesis 7:17 says that Noah's Flood lasted for 40 days, but later on, in the same chapter (verse 24), it lasts for 150 days.

b) Errors in natural science:

for example, the whole Jewish concept of the Universe; the ancient Jews believed that the Universe was surrounded by waters held back by a solid bell-shaped barrier called "the firmament" (see Genesis, Chapter 1).

c) Historical errors:

for example, in Daniel, Chapter 5, the story of the "Fall of Babylon" is substantially different from what other historical documents have preserved.

d) Moral errors:

for example, in Joshua (11:10-15), the total destruction described there is presented as "God's will", but generations of Christians have been uncomfortable seeing God as the author of slaughter.

These are not new problems.

In the tradition of the rabbis, it was taught that one of the blessings to be received at Elijah's return would be an explanation of the discrepancies between the prophet Ezekiel's writings and the Torah itself. The ancients themselves understood that discrepancies existed.

Within Christian tradition, the Early Church realized that there were discrepancies in biblical history, geography, chronology, topography, predictions of events, etc...all within the text of the Scriptures.

And yet, several Catholic Church councils have made it clear that if Catholics believe the Bible to be "inspired", that means they expect the Bible to be truthful.

So how does one deal with the obvious discrepancies and errors in the texts of the Scriptures?

To answer the question, the Catholic tradition has always made a distinction between the "purpose" of Scripture and the methods and vehicles used to achieve that purpose.

The purpose of the Scriptures is to teach "salvation"...not to teach history, geography or anything else.

Note what the most recent general Church Council (Vatican II) says about the idea:

...the books of Scripture must be acknowledged  
as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error  
the truth which God wanted to put into the  
sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.

Dei Verbum, 11

So for a Catholic, the "inerrancy" of Scripture refers to the message of salvation. It doesn't refer to geographical accuracy or historical chronology. These are "methods" or "vehicles", and it doesn't matter whether they happen to be perfectly "factual"...because "fact" and "truth" are not always one and the same.

What the Bible teaches is the doctrinal matter that God wishes to convey to us as a part of our salvation-equipment, truths about God and his purposes.

So it doesn't matter whether Noah's Flood lasted 40 or 150 days - or even if it happened as Genesis described it, and it doesn't matter whether the details about the fall of Babylon differ substantially between the Book of Daniel and other historical documents.

What matters is to take ALL of the Scripture, to ponder and study it, and to understand the "Big Picture" of the history of our salvation that finally came to its highest point in the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus of Nazareth.

That, and that alone, is the "truth" of Scripture.

That is where "inerrancy" makes sense.

#### UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"Do not let SUNDAY be taken from you,  
either through sports activities  
or through anything else.  
If your soul has no SUNDAY,  
you become an orphan."

Albert Schweitzer

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Another week....YESSSS!

And then, a respite, a surcease, a hiatus...  
a SPRING BREAK!

Hang in there!

YOU CAN DO IT!!!!!!!!!!

Woodie